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Coups and Killings in Kabul

A KGB defector tells how Afghanistan became Brezhnev's



Vladimir Kuzichkin, 35, a former KGB major whose presence in Britain was announced by the British government last month, has given an extraordinary account of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan—perhaps the greatest blot on Brezhnev's career—as seen by the KGB. Kuzichkin, who defected to the British last June, had served under cover in Iran for five years. He was in the ultrasecret "Directorate S," which controls "illegals," Soviet-born agents abroad. In an exclusive interview in London last week with TIME's Frank Melville, Kuzichkin said: 1) Brezhnev himself overruled repeated advice from Yuri Andropov's KGB not to turn Afghanistan into a Soviet satellite, 2) Afghan President Babrak Karmal is a KGB agent of long standing, 3) Karmal's predecessor was murdered in his palace by a specially trained, KGB-led Soviet assault group. Kuzichkin's account:

Senior KGB officers rarely let their hair down about politics. But Afghanistan has exasperated many. As a former boss [a KGB general] put it late one night: "Afghanistan is our Viet Nam. Look at what has happened. We began by simply backing a friendly regime; slowly we got more deeply involved; then we started manipulating the regime—sometimes using desperate measures—and now? Now we are bogged down in a war we cannot win and cannot abandon. It's ridiculous. A mess. And but for Brezhnev and company we would never have got into it in the first place." The general had said what many of us involved with Afghanistan—in the KGB, the army and outside—felt but would not stick our necks out to say.

It all began innocently enough with a lucky accident. Over the past 50 years we had never had any serious problems with the Afghan kings. Then, in 1973, [Mohammed] Daoud overthrew the monarchy with the help of the leftists. Although the leftist officers had been trained in the Soviet Union, we had not encouraged them to overthrow the King. Nonetheless, the reaction in the Soviet leadership was that this change was for the good.

Our relations with Daoud were never very good. He was keen to keep open his links with the West. He did not wish to become too closely involved with us. Those of us who knew Afghanistan were convinced no harm would come of that. The Afghans would slaughter each other for generations, regardless of whether they claimed to be Communists.

It was inconceivable to us that Afghanistan could do any credit to the Soviet Union, let alone "Communism." The Afghans, we told each other, should be left to stew in their own juice. We could never control them, but neither could anyone else. We had our first taste of things to come in 1978. Daoud turned against the Communists who had helped him to power. Not only did he arrest the leaders of the Afghan Communist party, but he planned to execute them. The Af-

ghan Communists were in a desperate position. They consulted the Soviet embassy in Kabul. Moscow quickly confirmed that we would support their proposed coup against Daoud. Just before it was too late, the Communist leaders ordered the



Brezhnev welcoming Babrak Karmal to Moscow in 1980

coup—in fact, from their prison cells.

The coup succeeded, and Afghanistan went Communist. But Mr. Brezhnev and his colleagues brushed aside the vitally important warnings that the KGB was giving them—and disaster ensued. At the outset the Politburo felt it now had a chance to make some real headway in Afghanistan. It would pour in money and advisers. Afghanistan's links with the West would be gradually severed. Afghanistan would be not only a neighboring country with whom we had good relations, like Finland, but a new member of the "Communist family."

The KGB tried to explain tactfully that a Communist takeover in Afghanistan presented hair-raising problems. We pointed out that despite all his slaughter, the tribes had accepted

Daoud as a legitimate ruler. An openly Communist regime would arouse hostility that would then be directed against the Soviet Union.

It was clearly of the utmost importance that Afghanistan should have the right leader. The choice was between Karmal, who headed the Parcham faction in the Afghan Communist party, and [Noor Mohammed] Taraki, who headed the Khalq faction. We knew a lot about both men. In the papers we put to the Politburo, we scrupulously assessed their strengths and weaknesses. Our assessment made it clear that Taraki would be a disastrous choice. He was savage by temperament, had little feel for handling complex political issues, and would be easily influenced by his cronies, but not by us. Karmal, on the other hand, we said, understood the need for subtle policies. Moreover, he had been a KGB agent for many years. He could be relied upon to accept our advice.

The Politburo decided to back Taraki because Mr. Brezhnev said he knew Taraki personally. He was sure Taraki would do a good job! Things started going off the rails almost at once. Taraki shipped Karmal off to Prague as ambassador. He then set about killing Karmal's supporters (many of whom were our own informers). Brezhnev would do nothing to stop this slaughter—and Karmal, who was already disgruntled, began to bear a bitter grudge against the Soviet Union. Things soon went from bad to worse. The Shah had fallen in Iran. Taraki's policies seemed certain to ensure there would also be a massive Muslim insurrection in Afghanistan. Taraki's response was to slaughter any opposition within his reach. Moscow tried to persuade him that this was a recipe for disaster, he should not repeat Stalin's errors. Taraki told Moscow to mind its own business.

One day things began to look brighter. A man called [Hafizullah] Amin seemingly emerged from nowhere to be Taraki's deputy. He was a cultivated Oriental charmer. Quietly, Amin began to take control away from Taraki. More important, he persuaded Moscow that he would be able to defuse the Muslim threat. We at the KGB, though, had doubts about Amin from the start. Our investigations showed him to be a smooth-talking fascist who was secretly pro-Western (he had been educated in the United States) and had links with the Americans. We also suspected that he had links with the CIA, but we had no proof. In short, the

KGB was pointing to a danger that Amir—if he could ride the tiger of Muslim insurgency and come out on top as the leader of an Islamic Afghanistan—not only would turn to the West but would also expel the Soviet Union—lock, stock and barrel—from Afghanistan. On political grounds, the KGB argued, it would be better, even at this late hour, to put Karmal in as President.

Despite our warnings, and to our complete amazement, Mr. Brezhnev backed Amin. Taraki was invited to Moscow. Secretly, Mr. Brezhnev and his Politburo colleagues had agreed with Amin that Amin would arrange for Taraki to step down as President on his return to Kabul. Amin carried out the agreement in spirit, if not to the letter: Taraki stepped straight from the presidency to his grave. Moscow was willing to turn a blind eye to that. It was only weeks, however, before the smooth-talking Amin made the KGB argument seem correct. Amin did not honor specific promises made to the Soviet Union; he complained about the KGB's activities in Afghanistan, and he wanted Soviet officials who had had the "effrontery" to advise him recalled. Moreover, things in Afghanistan were looking blacker and blacker. Terrible reports were coming in of what Muslim insurgents were doing to any Soviet advisers they caught. Worse, though the uprising was spreading, Amin seemed to be doing nothing to combat it.

The Politburo now really was convinced that the KGB argument had been right: Amin was planning to turn Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. So the Politburo decided Amin had to go. Preferably quietly—but certainly dead. At first, we—that is, the KGB—were given the job. We had an officer, an illegal who passed as an Afghan and had for some time been one of Amin's personal cooks. He was ordered to poison Amin. But Amin was as careful as any of the Borgias. He kept switching his food and drink as if he expected to be poisoned. The illegal's nerves began to fray as his attempts.

The failures annoyed Moscow. The Politburo accepted a less quiet way of getting rid of Amin. This time special Soviet troops were to storm the presidential palace. The day after Christmas 1979, Soviet paratroopers began arriving at the Kabul airport. They strengthened the substantial garrison we had quietly been building up there. The next day an armored column moved out of the airport toward the palace. It consisted of a few hundred Soviet commandos, plus a specially trained assault group of KGB officers—rather like the U.S. Green Berets. They were all in Afghan uniforms, and their vehicles had Afghan markings.

Along the road the column was stopped at an Afghan checkpoint. Afghan troops gathered round to find out what was happening. Suddenly the flaps of the front vehicle went up and the Afghans were machine-gunned to the ground. The column rolled on. When it reached the palace, the special troops attacked from three sides, while Colonel Bayerenov (the head of the KGB's terrorist-training school) led the assault on the palace. The attack got off to a good start. It would have been even better had the leading armored vehicle not got caught up in the palace gates. Moscow wanted no Afghans left to tell the tale of what had happened in the palace. No prisoners were to be taken. Anybody leaving the building was to be shot on sight. Amin was found drinking in a bar on the top floor of the palace. He was shot without question. So was the

sions of such a blow to our prestige would be unpredictable. The Soviet Union could not run such a risk. The Politburo was determined to show that the Soviet Union would not be pushed about.

Now the military came to the fore. The army had not been happy about the way our military involvement in Afghanistan had been handled. Some had argued that troops, not advisers, should have been sent in in 1978, before things got out of hand. But in December 1979, the general staff felt that 80,000 or so Soviet troops could get the situation under control.

There was now a new Afghan leader, a KGB agent at that, and substantial Soviet support. The Afghan army, we believed, would go over to the offensive. The insurgents themselves would be reluctant to take on such odds. Soviet troops were just supposed to provide the initial stiffener.

Well before Amin's murder, two divisions, specially made up of Farsi-speaking troops from neighboring Tadzhikistan and Uzbekistan, had been assembled along the frontier. They all had Afghan uniforms. They were supposed to make our intervention go more smoothly. In retrospect, it was an error. In no time at all they were black-marketeering (including selling army equipment), buying Korans and robbing the local population (for which many were executed). They showed little interest in fighting

"their neighbors," the Afghans. European troops were soon brought to replace the Tadzhiks and Uzbeks.

We made two major errors of judgment: we overestimated the willingness of the Afghan army to fight and underestimated the upsurge of Afghan resistance. As a result we sent in too few troops. The trouble is that Moscow cannot correct this error. When we began to get bogged down, of course, the army argued for more troops. The Soviet general staff wanted at least twice as many—to seal off the frontier with Pakistan and get better control along the border with Iran. But the Politburo ruled that out. By then, it feared provoking a serious Western reaction.

Now no one in the U.S.S.R. is happy. Soviet troops are bogged down. Karmal has not established effective leadership. Like his predecessors, Karmal is proving somewhat truculent in his dealings with Moscow. Given the way he was treated, that is hardly surprising. By the spring of this year, the Politburo was already considering having him replaced—but decided to give him a bit more time.

Nobody can really see a way out. There is no prospect that the Soviet Union will withdraw from Afghanistan in the foreseeable future. For those of us who know what really happened, it is all a stark reminder of how the Soviet leadership deals with foreign policy. ■



A trio of dead Afghan leaders: Daoud, Taraki and Amin

"Now we are bogged down in a war we cannot win and cannot abandon."

exceedingly beautiful young woman with him. The Soviet objective had been achieved. But the plan was not without its weaknesses. No one had expected Amin's bodyguard to put up such ferocious resistance within the palace. Resistance was so stiff that Colonel Bayerenov stepped out of the door to call for reinforcements. He had forgotten about the orders to the troops outside and was shot.

Anyway, Amin was now dead. Earlier, Karmal had been located in Europe and brought to Moscow. He agreed to be the President of Afghanistan and to invite Soviet troops in to protect his regime. Even before that announcement was made, tens of thousands of our ground troops were moving into Afghanistan.

The Western press attributed several motives to Moscow. Some said we were worried about the impact on Soviet Muslims that an upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran and Afghanistan could have. Others said that we insisted on having "our own man" or that we were inflamed by the terrible deaths that Afghan insurgents were inflicting on Soviet advisers. There is something in these interpretations. But they miss the real point.

What moved the Politburo was the thought that the Muslim revolution in Afghanistan could succeed and that, as a result, the Soviet Union would actually be thrown out of Afghanistan. The repercus-